

Church Turnarounds #2: CPR to Get Life Flowing Again By Bob Young

“Heaven, We Have a Problem”

The directory [*Churches of Christ in the United States, 2008*] identifies 12,629 a cappella Churches of Christ with 1,578,281 adherents, 526 fewer churches and 78,436 fewer people in the pews than 6 years ago.

What has brought about the decline? What causes people to leave and churches to permanently close their doors? What can be done to reverse the trend? We must repent (change). To turn around, turn around.

Jesus entrusted us with good news to share, and we do not share it enough. We do not tell our friends about Jesus' death for their sins and how they, by grace through faith, can be saved. We talk about sharing it. We believe "the church" ought to share it. Yet, days pass, then weeks, and we cannot name one person to whom we have deliberately revealed "What Jesus has done" for us. To turn around, turn around.

Our silence about the good news causes us to look like we have already perished. We must repent of our silence or we will die. Who will you tell about the goodness of Jesus this week? To turn around, turn around.

The church must rethink evangelism. We have thought the key was attractational and have missed that the church is called to be missional.

We must face reality. The 2008 directory lists 12,629 a cappella Churches of Christ with 1,578,281 adherents nationwide. In 2001 a self-identification report listed 2.6M; in 2004 there was an estimate of 3.6M; perhaps the 10th largest group in the US. The 2007 Yearbook of American-Canadian Churches, 16th, 1.6M, with all of the Restoration branches combined representing the 7th largest group.

Introduction

What are the life-giving functions of the church? We have to do what matters to turn churches around. Illustration: CPR is not designed to help people eat and drink. CPR focuses on heartbeat and breathing. What are the essential functions? How can the church get back to the essentials?

The statistic is quoted often: 85 percent of churches in the United States are plateaued or declining. That's approximately 340,000 churches (of all kinds). In other words, 340,000 churches need to change. Among churches of Christ, about 8500 churches need help—1500 or fewer can be said to be healthy, even fewer are growing. Some of the 1500 are not growing; they are merely swelling. Urban “receiving-churches” are being fed by rural “feeder-churches.” Only about 600 of our congregations are over 300. That is not a magic number, but it is a kind of critical mass for the kind of ministry programs we have developed. There is a barrier also at 200. Workshops and seminars focus on the questions: how to get over the 200 barrier, how to move from a relational-pastoral model to a ministry model.

The question for many churches that are declining is how to move from a ministry model to a pastoral model. To determine whether a church is plateaued or declining requires a look at a decade or multiple decades, not just a one or two year. What has happened in the last 10 years? In churches of Christ, the number is not much different than our religious friends and neighbors. We do not have a unique problem. It is not different for us than for others.

If 85%, or maybe 90%, of our congregations need help, what is the solution? How can change occur? What skills are required?

Some churches are growing. What kind of churches are growing.

- New churches, early in the church life cycle.
- Urban churches, receiving churches.
- Overall, conservative churches that know what they believe grow better than churches that experiment with new innovations
- Churches that intentionally undertake new plans to reverse the downward trend. [*If these churches can be renewed, can my local church also be renewed?*]

One survey on church renewal gives accounts of five churches that exemplify "turnaround." What they all have in common is an outward look, flattening the leadership structure, involving the entire church in the rebuilding process, helping the body function.

Five Factors in Successful Turnarounds

Some turnarounds are dramatic: the fighting that divided a congregation and spoiled their reputation ends, and the church is suddenly alive and growing. Willingham: fighting about a new way of fighting.

Some turnarounds are subtle: after decades of stagnant attendance and lackluster ministry, people find renewed purpose, and the winds of the Spirit move again.

All turnarounds are significant: the gospel is advanced by healthy churches. Yet even the more evangelistic denominations, focused on church planting, are battling inertia.

Lyle Schaller's turn-of-the-millennium prediction is coming true: a few notable large churches are growing larger, but most churches, and almost all the smaller churches, are growing smaller.

In this environment, the successful rejuvenation of an existing congregation is newsworthy. Most of the churches in the limelight these days are urban and suburban church founders who have shattered the paradigms. Few have systematically reengineered plodding, low-energy congregations into healthy, resilient ministries. But such accomplishment, often quietly done and unnoticed because it takes a while, is worthy of celebration.

1. Distinguish between symptoms and underlying problems.

CPR illustration. What's the problem, what's the symptom?

What's the problem? How big is this problem? It depends on whom you ask. Long and short, the congregation tends to focus on the symptoms rather than causes.

Minister: church in decline because it was a battling congregation with a bad reputation. First step is helping the congregation admit there is a problem.

Members: "aging congregation," "loss of direction," "loss of meaningful impact on the community," and "attendance" problems.

Experienced ministers are more likely to see and focus on foundational causes rather than symptoms of the problem.

2. Work on team building and timing, not just vision.

The tipping point is when it is evident to most everyone in the congregation that a problem exists and change is needed. Typical distributions--

- 40% say problem "became apparent gradually."
- 30% say the problem was "clearly evident for a long time."
- Only 10% had a "sudden realization there was a problem."
- People come on board—recognizing both problems and solutions—at their own speed; they should not be rushed.

There is danger in pointing out the problem to masses of people who have not realized there is a problem, unless there soon follows discussion of courses of action. Point out the problem too soon and risk losing momentum needed to fuel new initiatives. Take the problem public too late, and the congregation will feel left out of the process, and likely balk. Need more communication in the process. "You can't communicate enough why you're doing things." "And it's more than just from the pulpit: one on one, small groups, committee settings, any forum where people feel free to ask questions and to process."

"Talk about it until they are sick of it, then everybody's ready to do something about it."

3. Spiritual initiatives are vital.

Develop a revitalization strategy. Ohio church, after continued trouble and exodus of members, called the leaders to prayer. "That was a breakthrough. We saw many people come to the Lord, and soon I had a new leadership team in place and equipped."

75% of churches report "spiritual initiatives" as important to addressing the problems. "Education of the congregation," "new mission statements," and new ministries were cited by more than half of all respondents, but it was the spiritual initiatives that excited most people.

Need for internal healing by forgiving past hurts and praying for each other.

4. God is at work.

The fingerprints principle: God is at work, help the people recognize "God's fingerprints."

God Sightings: Find where God is working and join him there.

I had seniors say to me, this is the first time I have ever thought of this stuff. The people who would often be the greatest barriers to change said, As long as we believe it is from God, we will try it. Point out God's fingerprints. This is about fulfilling God's plan for us as a church.

Survey: see God's fingerprints in the providential arrival of skilled leaders, unexpected financial strength, the quiet awakening of a congregation to the needs of the community. One respondent said lightning struck the building and burned half of it down.

5. Such efforts work better than expected.

We asked, "What was the attitude of average church members about the problem?" "Anxiety," "confusion," and "low morale" were the top three responses.

Only 4 percent of churches reported resistance when turnaround initiatives were announced.

In all, 95% reported the congregation as a whole was supportive soon after implementation.

More good news: turnaround initiatives took effect almost immediately, with noticeable results in less than one year.

“Breakout Churches” Survey, Thom Rainer

Churches devoted to Jesus Christ must strive to break out of mediocrity and achieve unprecedented fruitfulness. In “Breakout Churches,” Rainer highlights churches that experienced an extended period of health and growth following a period of decline or plateau. Rainer labels these churches “breakout churches” and identifies key patterns and trends common to breakout churches, describes central elements contributing to a church’s transformation from mediocrity to greatness.

Rainer points to six key components.

First, churches must develop leadership with qualities such as sensitivity to criticism, determination, kindness and visionary thinking. Rainer taps the Book of Acts to identify several tiers of leadership, culminating with what he named “Acts 6/7 leadership.”

Second, leaders of breakout churches must experience a moment in which they become aware of the church’s deficiencies, confront the facts and experience a personal crisis because of the deficiencies.

Third, after leaders experience the moment of crisis, they develop the third component: a commitment to address issues simultaneously.

Fourth, the church must discover its vision by noting where the passion of the leaders, the gifts of the congregation and the needs of the community intersect.

Fifth, breakout churches develop a culture that demands excellence in all areas of church life.

Sixth, breakout churches complete their transformation by utilizing fresh approaches to accelerate growth in a manner consistent with the vision, noting that if churches trust God and follow biblical principles, they have the potential to move from mediocrity to greatness.

“Christian Chronicle” Article

We have a decline — a fellowship hemorrhaging members and churches.

Use the numbers as a starting point for examining deeper issues and challenges facing us.

Four lessons bear repeating:

- We must become more diverse if we are to reach our culture. Our congregations remain mostly white and have become more affluent. Reaching our society for the Lord will require creative approaches to win souls

who may be a different color than we are or speak a different language than we do. We must remember that Jesus loves all the children — red and yellow, black and white.

- We must make the eternal faith relevant to the young people who grow up in our congregations. Doctrine is important, but the young won't stick around churches mired in internal squabbles and their own way of doing things. A right understanding of Scripture is essential, but the young want more than words. The answer for keeping our young in the church is not contemporary music or flashy sermons, but churches with a real compassion and heart for sharing Jesus with a lost world.
- We must plant new congregations outside the Bible Belt, in places where folks have never heard of us. And we must be willing to try new approaches to reach a new generation, not sacrificing biblical teaching but perhaps adapting the Acts 2 model of church to include settings such as house churches or groups of believers meeting in coffee shops or parks. We must remember that church buildings are a creation of the modern church, not an ancient pattern.
- Most importantly, we must pledge our allegiance anew to our first love. We must remember that God so loved the world that he gave his only son to die on a cross so that we might have forgiveness from our sins. We must never stop telling that incredible, true story of love and sacrifice. Only then will more people know Jesus and the church grow and prosper.

John Scott: In my humble judgment, it still comes back to being able to build healthy, biblical friendships both inside the church building and, just as important, outside our walls. We simply have to build more bridges and fewer walls.